

India's elections: Results from the biggest event in the world

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The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 282 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha, becoming the first party other than Congress to win a parliamentary majority without coalition partners. The outcome signals the most decisive mandate for an Indian leader since 1984 when Rajiv Gandhi swept the polls following the assassination of his mother, Indira Gandhi. The BJP-led coalition, the National Democratic Alliance, secured a total of 336 seats. Meanwhile, Congress had its worst-ever showing in an Indian election, winning only 44 seats, far less than predicted by even the party's harshest critics.



On Friday, 16 May, Professor Pranab Bardhan and journalists James Astill, Mukul Devichand and Charu Shahane participated in a [panel discussion](#) chaired by Dr Mukulika Banerjee at LSE to discuss these results (see live tweets from the event [here](#)). The discussion centred on whether this election marked a fundamental change in India's political culture, and, more importantly, whether BJP's controversial prime ministerial candidate [Narendra Modi](#) will be able to live up to the electorate's high expectations.

Charu Shahane, a member of the Indian Journalists' Association and a senior broadcast journalist at the BBC World Service, said the election revealed much about Indian democracy because it was presidential in style—"it was about three men and their style, rather than three parties and their policies." She also pointed out that the election was defined by surprising vote patterns; for example, middle class and Muslim voters came out to support the BJP, which explains the party's historic win.

Professor Bardhan pointed out that economic issues – specifically inflation, jobs and corruption – had defined the election campaign, and that Modi would quickly feel the pressure to improve India's overall economic performance, including its poor job creation record. Bardhan predicted that Modi will seek to reduce inflation on coming into office, but explained that he would have limited success, partly because the inflation rate depends on the policies of the autonomous Reserve Bank of India, and partly because a genuine attempt to tackle inflation would require Modi to take up issues such as subsidies, which no Indian politician is willing to touch—even with a historic mandate.

Bardhan believed Modi would be able to spur some economic growth in the short term by pushing through

infrastructure and investment projects that stalled due to bureaucratic delays. But he warned that Modi would not be able to work economic miracles, especially since 80 per cent of stalled projects in India are managed at the state level, and not by the federal government.

Pointing out that the BJP spent \$1 billion on its election campaign – much of it provided by major corporations – Bardhan also warned that the problem of crony capitalism in India would likely worsen under Modi. “Payback time will come,” he said, “and a government can’t pay [corporations] back at the same time as solving the problem of crony capitalism.” Concluding that Modi was likely to underperform on the economic front owing to broader political and structural problems, Bardhan expressed concerns that the BJP might try to deflect attention from major economic problems by creating domestic tensions either at the borders or domestically, through communalism.

Mukul Devichand, another BBC journalist and the creator and presenter of BBC Trending, argued that there was wider social participation and political engagement during this election than ever before. He described how people in India had described the election as their ‘Arab Spring’ because they were able to use social media to broach issues that were not raised in previous elections. Based on several examples from the campaign trail of popular Twitter hashtags and viral videos that helped define the public conversation around the elections, Devichand asked whether the use of social media in this election changed the way Indian politics works.

But Devichand also sought to temper excitement around the use of social media in India, not least by pointing out that the Aam Aadmi Party – “the party of social media” that used digital tools to mobilise people – performed quite poorly. He also acknowledged that many of these online memes were created or promoted by the mainstream media, especially television channels, creating an echo chamber within which certain topics were discussed obsessively. Political parties, too, sought to exploit social media tools. For example, Devichand explained that BJP representatives had told him that they saw the use of social media as a “war” and thus spent a lot of money using it effectively. According to Devichand, the BJP was able to use social media and other digital technologies to correct misperceptions about the party and also to make the argument that Congress too has been guilty of stoking communalism—messages that may have contributed to the party’s major win.

James Astill, the Political Editor at *The Economist*, concluded the discussion on a sobering note, arguing that despite Modi’s attempts to reinvent himself as an economic heavyweight, his victory would likely instigate communal tensions in India. Astill pointed out that Modi has not done enough to be exonerated from charges of complicity in the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002. He said the argument that the Supreme Court had cleared Modi’s name was [a weak one](#), and that the Muslim ghettos arising out of post-2002 relief camps – which Modi described as “child-breeding centres” – were still visible in Ahmedabad as a testament to his troubling track record. Astill warned that under Modi’s leadership, the BJP’s apparatchiks would believe they have greater licence to engage in communal violence, leading to widespread tensions. He also warned that growing disillusionment with the party – which is inevitable given electorate’s high expectations – could also manifest as soaring communal tensions.

Touching on Congress’s dismal performance, the panellists agreed that the party would form part of a very weak opposition. But no one was ready to call it quits for Congress either. Bardhan suggested that the Congress is now facing a dilemma—it cannot survive as a dynasty party, but at the same time the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is the only thing holding together the party’s internal factions. Meanwhile, Astill hinted that the party’s future may lie with Priyanka rather than Rahul Gandhi.

To conclude the discussion, panellists pointed to some of the challenges that lie ahead for Indian democracy under a BJP-led government. Bardhan checked optimism that Indian democracy would tame Modi’s authoritarian tendencies, saying, “many aspects of Indian democracy are not as robust as its electoral processes and may not withstand pressures from a strong-arm leader.” The panellists also pointed out that Modi’s tenure would prove to be a test of centre-state relations, given that he himself called for more federalism while serving as the chief minister of Gujarat, but was unlikely to take the same position from the prime minister’s seat. It remains to be seen how Modi will balance the rise of powerful regional leaders such as Mamata Banerjee and J. Jayalalithaa with his own

centralising tendencies.

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